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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001469

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [MV](#)

SUBJECT: DEMOCRACY IN MALDIVES: ARE WE THERE YET?

REF: A. COLOMBO 997

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 1295

[1](#)C. COLOMBO 1420

[1](#)D. COLOMBO 1449

Classified By: CHARGE' D'AFFAIRES JAMES F. ENTWISTLE FOR REASONS 1.4(b)  
and (d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: August 12-17 poloff visited Male' and met with government officials, members of the opposition party, and civil society groups to discuss the reform process in Maldives. Most contacts said that while the Maldives has seen some democratic progress, much work remains to be done to ensure greater rights. End summary.

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DEMOCRACY (IN)ACTION  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) In the wake of pro-reform demonstrations in Male' (Reftels C and D), many interlocutors noted that the crowds consisted primarily of curious on-lookers, not politically-minded protesters. (Note: We have had no reports of demonstrations or violence in Male' after August 14. Sources in Male' tell us the streets have remained calm. End note.) Numerous people told poloff that most Maldivians lack general political awareness. The Minister of Education pointed out that history, government, and civics are not/not offered as classes at secondary schools. In addition, cabinet ministers, members of the Human Rights Commission, and civil society representatives all told poloff that multi-party democracy remains an alien concept for Maldivians.

[1](#)3. (U) Nevertheless, four political parties have been registered since June (Reftel A). In chronological order of official recognition, they are: the opposition Maldives Democratic Party (MDP), the government's DRP (the local language name roughly translates as 'Maldivian People's Party'), the Islamic Democratic Party (IDP), and the Adalath, or Justice Party. Despite the existence of four parties, all interlocutors spoke only in terms of "the government" and "the opposition."

[1](#)4. (C) Poloff spoke to several Maldivians who disagreed with current government policies but were unwilling to commit to any party. A proprietor of a small business criticized both the government and the MDP, saying each side had a personal agenda that might not support the interests of average Maldivians. However, he did say, "Last year I wasn't even allowed to say as much as (the first syllable in the President's name), and now I can say 'I don't like President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom,' and that's the result of somebody's sacrifice, and I appreciate that." An employee at the Human Rights Commission also said she was not affiliated with any party, but added, "It's a united front against the current government."

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REFORMERS: MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE  
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[1](#)5. (SBU) In addition to the recognition of political parties, the July 14 Cabinet re-shuffle has been one sign of democratic progress (Reftel B). On August 18 President Gayoom appointed Gasim Ibrahim, a wealthy businessman who had been among the detainees kept in solitary confinement after the previous year's demonstrations, as Finance Minister. (Note: The MDP had considered Gasim one of their own, but the resort owner had been keeping a low profile politically since his release from detention late last year. End note.) The majority of the new cabinet ministers are young technocrats with broad experience with issues in their portfolios. The Minister of Education spent almost twenty years as a curriculum developer and teacher trainer, the Minister of Gender and Family worked at UNICEF for six years, and the Minister of Justice is a newly minted lawyer educated in England. In meetings with poloff, these Ministers discussed unique challenges within their fields and their intent to work with other Ministries and government actors to press for necessary changes. For example, the Gender and Family Minister seeks to found community centers for children, the Education Minister discussed having Parent-Teacher Associations provide an adult to accompany children from their community to schools far from their local islands, and the Justice Minister said he will urge the

President to appoint more female judges.

16. (SBU) Some MDP members in Male', however, contended that the changes to the cabinet were merely cosmetic. They conceded that there are some sincere efforts at reform on the part of a few government officials, but expressed great frustration that more has not been done. As one speaker put it, "It's always a small step forward and then a big step backward." MDP members were gravely concerned about alleged arbitrary arrests and physical abuse by police and National Security Service forces during the August 12-14 demonstrations (Reftels C and D) as well as the lack of press freedom in Maldives. They cited numerous grievances with the current regime, but when poloff asked them to outline their alternate political vision, they were unable to provide specifics. Instead, they reiterated general platitudes about the need for greater freedom and respect for human rights.

17. (SBU) Members of the MDP were not alone in their call for continued reform. In fact, even members of the government's DRP supported that view. One DRP speaker told poloff that the birth of the party system has given people a greater voice in government. He explained that he was drawn to the DRP because he wants to institute change from within the system. He cited examples of cabinet changes and tax reforms as evidence that progressives have the President's attention, and he said he wanted to use that position to press for greater freedom.

18. (C) Another DRP member addressed MDP complaints of unfair arrests: "I am 34 years old, I have a wife and kid, I've lived on Male' for 27 years, and I've never been arrested." Yet he went on to add that of his six brothers, two are in jail after the August 12-14 demonstrations. In a separate meeting, the Minister of Gender and Family said that there are political divisions within families and among close friends, and in the small Maldivian community, many are deeply saddened by the strife surrounding the reform process. Yet she ended on a hopeful note: "As a minister, I see in my colleagues a willingness to reform and change."

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) Government officials and MDP members alike claimed that most Maldivians are comparatively ignorant about politics. Nevertheless, poloff met a number of individuals unaffiliated with any party, all of whom seemed very politically engaged. One waiter spoke eloquently about the lack of labor laws and the slow constitutional reform process as compared to the quick progress in Iraq. It seems that the reason many people have yet to join a political party is not a lack of political awareness, but rather the fact that no party has outlined a clear platform or philosophy of governance. Regardless of political affiliation, however, Maldivians seem united in their desire to see greater freedom and democratic reforms. Many of them, including government officials, are seeking guidance on how best to move forward. The Defense Minister made a candid, self-deprecating comment, perhaps summarizing the view of many Maldivians: "What do I know about democratization? I've been here all my life." The U.S. should assist Maldivians by supporting the progress they have made so far and by encouraging further peaceful reforms.

ENTWISTLE